Post-Conceptual Art Practice: New Directions — Part Two

Foreword

Grange Hotels are very keen to showcase works of art and to provide an environment for new artists to show large and ambitious works in public spaces. We are pleased to support Plastic Propaganda's initiative to display their work in our hotels, thereby providing the artists with an opportunity to reach mass audiences who would otherwise not see their works.

Displaying fine art in an alternative space can often refocus the work by placing it in a different context. It also provides an unusual yet stimulating backdrop for hotel guests and corporate professional clientele using the hotel's facilities. The essence of the hotel's public spaces reproduces the large white cube environment of a gallery that reacts directly to the artwork being shown here.

The particular spaces chosen for the artworks give them the chance to breathe and to be contemplated at leisure. It is a surprise to encounter original contemporary art in this modern hotel arena. The cultural implication of the paintings and sculptures gives viewers an opportunity to escape from their expected activity into an existence outside the hotel environment and the everyday.

We want our guests to enjoy and be stimulated by these works of art and feel that their presence enriches the overall environment of the hotel.

Grange Hotels, March 2012

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Introduction

Among the distinctive changes of the late 1980s and in the initial years of the decade which followed, was the shift towards the use of new curatorial and exhibition venues. What became the nucleus of the so-called 'YBAs' – the Young British Artists - whose work defined the cultural sensibility of an era, originated in the use of vacant, post-industrial dockland spaces. In the decade which followed, much of London's gallery infrastructure re-located from the West to the capital's East End, forced out by punitive rents and an art market which had begun to register the aftershocks of mass unemployment and social dislocation.

Over twenty years on, after a long bull market, a post-industrial UK again confronts economic recession. Faced with funding cuts to colleges, art schools and state patronage, artists have responded with innovation, flair and pragmatism. Some work in collectives or self-curate. The doubling or collectivising of artistic agency, demonstrated, for example, by Claire Fontaine, KennardPhillips, Pil and Galia Kollectiv and SUPERFLEX, underlines a shift to more flexible, post-Fordist modes of cultural production.

William Henry and Angus Pryor's latest exhibition of work has been installed at the Grange Tower Bridge Hotel. Their first, at the West Wintergarden, Canary Wharf (2010) was staged at the heart of London's financial district. The deliberate choice of both venues signifies a broader constellation of linkages between cultural production and a more expansive engagement with audience and viewing communities for contemporary art. In the 1960s, the Situationist International coined the idea of 'détournement' to describe the use of urban spaces for appropriation and critique. A half century on, a post-conceptual generation of artists are exploring new locations for showing and situating their practice within a culture industry which has proven equally as responsive and resilient.

Dr Grant Pooke FRSA, School of Arts, University of Kent

William Henry: Perspectives on Practice

Interview by Grant Pooke, History & Philosophy of Art Dept., University of Kent, February 2012.

GP: How long have you been making work?

WH: I've been making 3D work from the very beginning of my formal art education at the University of Kent in 2004. I remember the very first day – suddenly moving from a linear dimensional representation straight to expressing the same but in 3D. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for me to do. Suddenly I felt free and in control – making choices for me.

GP: Why the preference for three dimensions?

WH: I use 3D as a relational aesthetic within the real world. For example, Matta-Clarke had his inside/outside buildings which changed perception of their relationship to the surrounding environment. Also, Grenville Davey enlarged everyday objects, throwing perception into confusion by creating industrial equivalents of Greek pediments.

GP: Do you approach the selection and manipulation of motifs in a pre-planned way, or is the making process more free-form and intuitive?

WH: Yes, there is a degree of pre planning – there has to be. I've always been systematic and had to be in a former professional life. However through expressive means, I've let chance play a role in my work by creating an image through form.

GP: Is there any particular artist you identify with? Why?

Marcel Duchamp, of course, for so very many different reasons; Rachael Whiteread (form); Brian Tolle (bringing a sense of fluidity into an inanimate object); Erwin Wurm (shapes and bends); Doris Salcedo (sense of loss and memory through the use of objects – the missing) and Gabriel Orozco.

GP: You are on record as describing your work as being 'fabricated from readymades.' These references to the Duchampian tradition were explicit in the Canary Wharf show back in 2010. Firstly, how would you characterise the work completed for the latest installation?

WH: I have tried to continue that tradition where the objects have been distorted again by a process. The starting point is always the same, and the object will have a personal connect with me, but the end result can be unexpected.

GP: Duchamp's readymades were noted for their apparent contingency. Many of the objects he selected seemed pretty random, but looking at several of the pieces showcased here, there is an appreciably musical theme. The analogies made by formalist critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried of the visual art they liked to musical composition are well known. Is this connection the reason behind your own, more literal choice of motif? If not, what has determined your selection of instruments to cast?

WH: No I don't pick an object at random. I consider, reject, and choose with purpose, in the same way a painter makes a choice of colour or brush size. Music has played a strong part in my upbringing. I remember labouring hard with the clarinet; my brothers played both the violin and flute, but I see a natural development taking place from my show at Canary Wharf where the final pieces I created included *Strung Out* (*2010*). The instruments are objects of beauty which, in the wrong hands, can produce awful sounds. This is an area I want to continue to explore – a journey into the world of music where not just the instruments are distorted to create an artefact but perhaps the idea of sound itself.

GP: Given some of these distinct influences, do you perceive a tension between a post-Duchampian, concept-lead aesthetic, and a more formalist inflexion to your practice?

WH: That's a good question! I'm continually trying to fight with both – the concept is very important to me and I want to describe or show it in many alternative ways. The key for me is that the new object is recognisable from its origin but shows distinctive new characteristics which are different or even better perhaps.

GP: Can we look in detail at one of your installed pieces; the triptych of cell phones. One, still attached to its base, has folded over and has almost collapsed in on itself. The casting process and the melting heat of the blowtorch, has made the object seem organic. Can you take us through the various technical processes involved in making these and similar pieces?

WH: Sure. Firstly, I prepare the readymade, make a silicone or vinyl mould , then make a cast of wax, apply heat and/or manipulate, allowing it to solidify. I create a further silicone mould and again a final resin or wax cast.

GP: Although the phones are among the smallest individual pieces on show, they share an interest in seriality and repetition. They reminded me of Minimalist and post-Minimalist practice, although your motifs are clearly not abstract. Were you conscious of these antecedents in any way?

WH: Yes definitely! I find comfort in seriality and repetition – 3 brothers – 3 children – all the same but very different in every way. Only the sex is the same – a finger is a finger and an eye is an eye but each part is different and each whole is different ; better maybe, but that's subjective - and that's the point I feel.

GP: More generally, with this exhibition, it seems to be a new dimension to your practice. How do you account for the shift?

WH: My Canary Wharf show demonstrated the link to Minimalism and post-Minimalist practice and these works continue to do so. Any shift highlights a practice development, perhaps becoming more thematic with a desire to explore deeper and with more thoroughness.

GP: In recent years, repetition and permutation have been given a more macabre and subversive edge within contemporary practice. In one striking comment a couple of years back, you described your work as emblematic of 'personal illness' and as 'metaphors for broken-ness'. Do you still perceive your practice in this way

WH: Yes very much so. The sculptures shown here at Grange Tower Bridge Hotel, function as the object they represent, but also as a metaphor for the human condition. This work reflects the state a person gets to once their initial condition changes, whether the cause is physical, mental or debilitating in another way. I am like many in the artworld, expressing life experiences through my art, focusing on things good, bad, everyday and on objects of importance and significance to me.

GP: One implication might be that making art is in some way cathartic. Personally, do you judge this to be the case? If so, how is this manifested itself in relation to your own experience.

WH: The work is not therapeutic, although it might have been eight years ago. It's about how we react to people. Do we react as if they are broken, or should we see them evolving or metamorphosing into a new dynamic persona? I explore the poignancy in that change through an aesthetic presence – one of beauty!

GP: Staying with this association, your sculptures are blowtorched and melted; forms are distorted, made mutable and organic. For example the three white mounted clarinets lean over like wheat in winter. Do you recognise characterisations of your work as evocative of a kind of stasis and entropy?

WH: Oh yes definitely, very much so. It's the very essence – the questions posed – are they being blown or pushed by an external force or is it strength from within that is forcing them to straighten? It is this inner strength that is more important to me.

GP: Does your work have a social or political dimension?

WH: Political – no, social maybe, but it's more a facet of the human condition and our responses to each other, particularly society's reaction to people with both physical and mental disabilities. Some might be broken but that does not render them useless and from adversity comes strength. Strength doesn't reside in having never been broken, but in the courage required to grow strong in the broken places. There can be beauty in this, but derived from a readymade.

GP: Galleries are essentially commercial showrooms where people go specifically to buy art. Although the profit imperative may be the same, hotel chains exist to serve other needs. Whilst there are precedents for this, do you perceive that there is a danger that art exhibited in this context might run the risk of being relegated to decoration or interior design? If so, in what ways do you feel that your work circumvents this possibility?

WH: No far from it. My work is for people to see. In Canary Wharf we had 500 people an hour going past the show in a public thoroughfare and here the viewing numbers will be big too – so much more than being tucked away in a gallery where only art purists visit. There is a real opportunity to seek a blend of contemporary art in a modern hotel space. This hotel environment provides an eclectic mix of users who utilise the space in differing ways, for business, meetings, rest, entertainment and relaxation etc. The art can provide an opportunity for contemplation or discussion; a form of common ground or an ice breaker.

GP: Do you have any plans for the medium and longer term development of your practice?

WH: Yes, plenty, some of which are happening quicker than anticipated. The practice is growing - my work is being seen by wider audiences. The works are now going abroad to Taiwan next month and to India in the autumn. Longer term there are plans for New York so the outlook is bright. The work is for people to see not just for those visiting art galleries!

Grant Pooke's *Contemporary British Art: An Introduction* was published by Routledge in 2011.

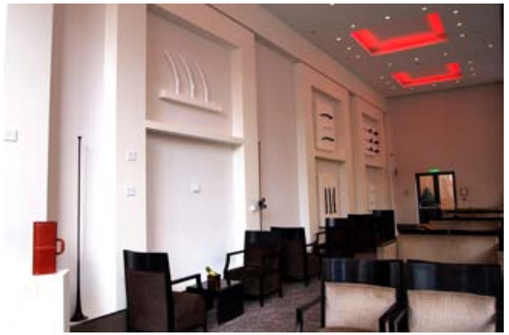
Euphonium, 2012 brass and paint

Knights Lounge

French Horn, 2012 brass and paint

Charcoal, 2012, plaster

Three Trumpets, 2012, brass, copper and paint



Knights Lounge

Strung Out, 2010 ceramic and wire

Unplugged, 2010 plaster

Angus Pryor: Personal Narratives, Disguised Narratives

Interview by Mike Walker, Grange Tower Bridge Hotel, January 2012

MW: Angus, good to be here, in this very fine hotel, surrounded by your work. You were telling me earlier that this is more work than you've exhibited in one go for a very long time, if ever. Any big surprises?

AP: I suppose the surprise is seeing the hang and from when I made them. Having a relationship with them in the studio is very different from when they're curated in a space. I've become very detached from them – I don't feel like I own these paintings anymore.

MW: This is a great space we're in here, because you can see them from so many different places and they're getting so much natural light. I haven't been looking round and thinking, 'oh, that's too high.' In fact, my main thought is how great it is to get distance from these paintings. In the restaurant they're right away from you and they keep their clarity.

AP: Yeah, they have a big impact in there. When we were first viewing the space I went in there and had a kind of Rothko moment! My heart was sinking and I was thinking 'What am I doing?' but then I quite liked them.

MW: You can cope with people eating in front of them, then?

AP: Yes, I want people to eat in front of mine. I'm not that precious about it. I like them to be looked at. They're not altarpieces. People have been coming in and having a very good reaction to them; people coming in on the first day we hung them and saying, 'These dark paintings…they're really bleak aren't they?' And they are. So they've picked up on that straightaway. I found that quite refreshing. It's a really mixed bag of people; guests, tourists, business people and creatives. In a strange way the paintings look out of place for the hotel, so people wonder what's going on.

MW: That leads to one question that I want to ask you. How much do you make groups of paintings? How much are you thinking about groups or thematic links?

AP: Most of the time! So when I start a series of paintings I never start a one-off but start thinking about multiples and the relationship between one painting to another, one image to another. So there's a kind of sequential narrative, not necessarily to show together, but that's my intellectual process of making, of how I think. So I visualise starting points, not end points. When I make a painting I've got no idea what it's going to look like. So I'll start and I'm not sure what I'm doing with it and I enter into this kind of thought process, like a journey through the painting. I keep thinking I'm going to make this perfect painting.

AP: I look at art a lot. I use history. In a postmodern age where we talk about culture rather than history, I just refer to both. I see them as the same thing. I refer to them in the same way. So I'll go to Venice or to New York and I'll use a reference to the city with a reference to MOMA or the Met. I try and make these works so they're all consuming. So it's like seeing everything, all at once, all the time. That's what I want to get through the painting. It's like listening to music. I listen to a lot of classical music when I'm making paintings. I also listen to football. So I think of it like the relationship between Beethoven and Chelsea. So that kind of work and the imagery that's going on within the paintings as I'm doing them, not necessarily deliberately, but I'm very aware that I'm using influences. I'm not bothered by it or hung up by the idea that you're transcribing.

MW: Can I take you back to something you said at the beginning of that, about your mode of working and how you start the painting off and start building it. You were telling me earlier about this painting above us, *Doliphilia*. Can you tell me how you went about making this painting?

AP: This painting started off as the battle of ideas – it was really about an argument, about two people having an idea and coming from two completely different perspectives on the idea. People get very irate if you disagree with them and the idea of the art of argument is becoming eclipsed by political correctness. So I started this painting thinking about this warring factor where you see two areas coming together and in the middle I was using this idea of a domestic scene. You know, you can go to a debate, you can go to a symposium, you go into a studio, you go into a classroom, you teach and then you go home and you put the telly on and the war in Afghanistan is on television. It's kind of that relationship and again it's all encompassing. If you described your day to somebody; for example, yesterday I was in the studio, teaching third years, and I was talking about censorship, memory and pornography. Then I went home and I put the kids to bed. I read bedtime stories and I'm thinking, 'God, the day's really odd', and I try to encompass that in the painting, where you start to think about everything, at once. If that makes sense?

MW: So there's a kind of striving to get a complete experiential thing in there?

AP: Absolutely, to absorb everything, at once and then things filter out to you afterwards. So that's the impact of that painting; those colours, there's a soldier, or a rabbit, or a gorilla throwing fruit – what does that mean? And then at the next level of consciousness, you start to think 'Actually, what is going on here? What am I thinking about? What am I doing with it?' So it's like that. Each painting has a different narrative within it, which I'm telling a story through. But then I'm layering different narratives at once so they come into conflict – but that's the language of painting.

MW: Is 'disguised narrative' your term for this or did it come from somebody else?

AP: I can't remember. I use it a lot, because I try to make it uncomfortable for me. I don't make a painting to be something of beauty, so it's not about an experience that in the end is aesthetic. I'm actually trying to deal with subjects that are difficult, with paint, which is problematic. Some of these canvases I've made deliberately big so that physically you are climbing over a painting to paint it. As far as you can reach is where the mark goes. You have to use sticks and you have to throw paint to get to the other side! I do all those things so that I'm constantly challenging what I'm doing in the painting. I will often paint on the floor, stand the paintings up and not recognise what I've done and start again. I'll paint them out because I can't see what it is, in my head. I've mentioned this thing that is a language and if I don't understand the language I'll get rid of it. I'm constantly re-painting and scraping off and starting again. It's a long process.

MW: We haven't talked about *Munich* but it seems to encapsulate quite well something that you've talked about, which is your paintings being diseased – 'pustules of plague' – and you've used various kinds of phrases to suggest something unpleasant under the surfaces or erupting through the surfaces. So I was going to psychoanalyse you. Where does that come from? What's working through there?

AP: That came from my love of film – from Ozu and Kurosawa. I went to a season at the BFI and watched every single one and just became obsessed with this kind of idea of the underbelly. Referring to Kurosawa and David Lynch, there's this great thing going on in the world; domestic bliss and work and life and children. And then there's shit underneath it and you think, actually, that happens to everyone. Under everyone's façade there's always this other thing that's coming through, so I then started looking at artists that have dealt with it. I use Michelangelo as a good example. *The Drunkeness of Noah* is where *The Deluge* came from. In that painting, Noah is ashamed, drunk and naked and it's in the Sistine Chapel. It's one of the most humanist things you'll ever see. That's a very interesting dialogue and question. It's properly shocking though, the painting, because when you show the Sistine Chapel to people it's Adam being created and when you show that bit they go, actually, what's that? The choice of Michelangelo to choose those segments, *The Deluge, The Drunkeness of Noah, The Shame, God Creating Light and Dark, Then Eve being Created and The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. They're bleak.

MW: In *The Drunkeness of Noah,* it's his sons, isn't it, who find him in this shameful state and he's naked. So there's a greater family intimacy and shame then you would ever want. Taking us back to the disguised narratives, you told me earlier about the fact that there are bodies in here, imprints of bodies. So whether you were present or not, there's something very intimate in these paintings as well.

AP: Definitely, very intimate! So they all start with a kind of personal agenda; whether it's me thinking about paintings or literature or music or even my own personal life. So I've got a painting called *The Marriage* that is about my marriage and *The Family* is my family and *Stack* is a personal commentary on relationships. So they're all kind of universal themes that run through people in the same way that the dark side of things run through people.

MW: And obviously, by the nature of disguise, there's only going to be a certain amount of that which is pick-uppable. Are there some paintings where you know you're letting more of it through and others where you know very little of it's going to come through?

AP: You know, I don't think of it like that at all. I think of them as paintings: I think ideas are ideas and I think paintings are paintings. And if things show through it's because the painting has demanded that, rather than me demanding or showing a pictorial narrative.

MW: The painting becomes a thing in itself. It almost doesn't really matter too much about the way you got it there?

AP: No, not at all. The journey's irrelevant in terms of the narrative. When I look at them, and I think *Stack* is a good example, the very personal one next door. I look at it now and I just can't remember what it means. So I'm thinking at the time I was going through something, but those things pass. Like how one might reflect in a diary where you're writing and it's very personal. (Then) someone else reads it and it's twenty years later and they're going what did that mean? So you're kind of recording things through the language, the medium, and then when I go back – other people know the work better than I do. Can you remember when you did that? I just can't. I'm working on ten paintings at once, so you kind of jump from one thing to another – what's in my head at the time. I kind of zone in and as soon as I finish them I zone out. So I look at them with fresh eyes a lot of the time; that's an interesting mark. I wonder how I made that? I don't think they're like me so that's quite odd as well.

MW: Do you want to say a little bit about whom you do respond to?

AP: Gerhard Richter. I thought The Tate exhibition was very good and I love his writing. He writes very eloquently so he knows what he's doing. Mine are deliberate paintings; I'm deliberately doing what I'm doing. I'm not chucking things around and hoping that other forces will come into play here, so I respond very well to that.

MW: So it's both phases – Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism.

AP: Definitely, very definitely! I also do think there are pathways in art history that you respond to. There's the Duchampian pathway – Duchamp through to Warhol to Pop Art – you can see that pathway very clearly and I don't think I'm part of it. I think I'm part of a different pathway which is German Expressionism through to Abstract Expressionism through to Post-Conceptual painting. So I see it in very clear categories and then, when you start to cross over, you start to have something new.

MW: And is the Post-Conceptual part of that about the fact that you are using these readymades, these imprints?

AP: Yes. I'm challenging the Duchampian ideology that I'm surrounded by. So if you take a readymade and you paint with it, what is it? Is it a readymade? Is it a painting? What is painting? Is painting standing at an easel with a brush or is it paint on canvas? Is painting the end-product or is it process?

MW: I'm not sure what it is. I was also thinking about Willem de Kooning.

AP: And Philip Guston. Both those two are interesting to me in the experimental nature of what they were doing and the challenges they took up. If you think of de Kooning going from those black and white paintings to figurative paintings and Guston going from abstraction to figuration – terrific jumps! What a brave thing to do.

MW: Morton Feldman wouldn't talk to Guston after he did that.

AP: No. I know. Horrific. People saying horrific things, but de Kooning wrote to him and said 'Well done, mate.' There was a correspondence between them. They understood what they were doing. They were challenging themselves as well as the art world. I like that. The ability not to go with the norm and I've struggled with it. I've always been a person who doesn't go on the path which is fashionable.

MW: Well, you're a painter for a start. Some people never seem to quite get the sheer tactile pleasure and brilliance of painting. It's not in the arena for them. All they see is the image as information.

AP: I think I'm a Modernist, you know. I think the tradition is Modernism, without question, and what's wrong with that? I like it. This idea that it stopped at some point then postmodernism came in and then we're into some other kind of phase. These things run in parallel for tens of years.

MW: It's interesting that it requires courage to say that. I remember hearing Sean Scully speak and he's unapologetically romantic...what he does and how he sees it and it being in that Modernist strain.

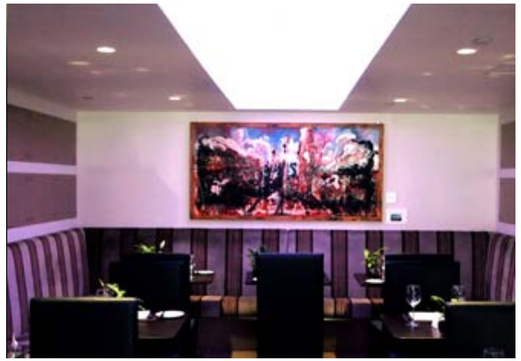
AP: But I'm also inconsistent. I'm quite familiar with that. I'll stand up for a painting one day, say something and the next day I'll say something else. It has revealed itself in a different way and I feel differently about it.

Mike Walker is a PhD student in the History of Philosophy of Art at the University of Kent, Canterbury.

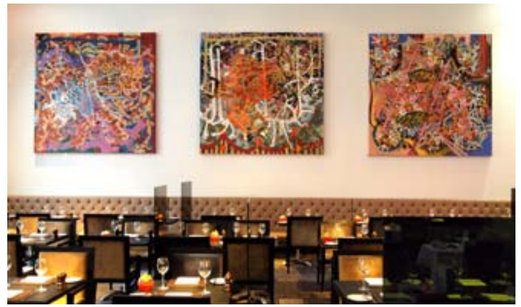
Doliphilia, 2009/2010, oil based media, plasticine on canvas, 8.5m x 2.5m

The Deluge, 2007, oil & caulk on canvas, 2.4m x 2.4m
Love & Death, 2009, oil, caulk and plasticine on canvas, 2.4m x 4.8m

Detail of *The Marriage,* 2007, oil & caulk on canvas, 2.4m x 2.4m



Venice, 2006, oil on canvas, 0.91m x 0.6m



MAD, 2008, oil & caulk on canvas, 2.4m x 2.4m
The Marriage, 2007, oil & caulk on canvas, 2.4m x 2.4m
Canterbury Giant, 2008, oil & caulk on canvas, 2.4m x 2.4m

The Garden of Earthly Delights, 2011, oil, caulk, plasticine & readymade, 9m x 2.5m

Stack, 2009/2010, oil, caulk & plasticine, 14m x 3m

Detail from *The Garden of Earthly Delights,* 2011, oil, caulk, plasticine & readymade, 9m x 2.5m

Interior: Grange Tower Bridge Hotel

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William Henry and Angus Pryor

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January — December 2012

www.plasticpropaganda.com

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Kent University Fine Art
ISBN: 978-0-9559230-8-1